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AUTHOR Hamer, Irving, Jr.
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ABSTRACT

In this speech the subject of eroding public confidence in the public schools is discussed. Elected school boards and school administrators quite frequently do not solve the problems facing the schools, and this failure is often because of lack of communication with the public and lack of citizen participation in decisions affecting school governance. A strong and rising force in the school system is the emergence of powerful teacher organizations, often oriented toward self-interest and politically effective. The result is that teacher organizations have acquired significant control of public education, and other local forces have either acquiesced or been disenfranchised. The problem is complicated by the fact that many school administrators are members of teacher organizations, or are sympathetic past members. Participation in school governance is a right of every citizen affected and should not be discouraged. With the decline of citizen participation there is the danger of significant growth in state influence and control, reinforced by politically active teacher unions. A meaningful local school advisory council can be the backbone to restoring public confidence in education. Citizen participation is central to the reform of the collective bargaining process. An informed public is an important ally when there is a need or interest in improving education. (JD)

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# PUTTING THE PUBLIC BACK INTO PUBLIC EDUCATION

by

Irving Hamer, Jr.
Staff Associate

Institute for Responsive Education

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*It is an adherent condition of human affairs that no intention, however sincere, of protecting the interests of others can make it safe or salutary to tie up their own hands. Still more obviously true is it, that by their own hands only can any positive and durable improvement of their circumstances in life be worked out. Throughout the joint influence of these two principles, all free communities have both been more exempt from social injustice and crime, and have attained more brilliant prosperity than any others...*

John Stuart Mill
Considerations on Representative Government - 1861

## PUTTING THE PUBLIC BACK INTO PUBLIC EDUCATION

There are many problems facing public education today. Some of these problems are fractionalism, accountability, escalating costs, and declining enrollments. Concerns about accountability, escalating costs and declining enrollments are significantly undermined by the pervasive fractionalism that plagues public education. Parents, students, teachers, administrators, and politicians are all at one another and not with one another. The problems of public education are being attacked by fractionalized pieces of the vast educational complex. There is little evidence of a collaborative effort on the part of all the players to solve the tough problems of public education. The icing on the cake is the distrust for

officials by the general public. Vietnam, civil rights, Watergate, all have contributed to the corroded view of public institutions held by the average citizen.

Increasingly, the public view of public institutions is that they are places to dole out discipline and inculcate moral values. The recent decision by the Supreme Court on discipline complies with the findings of the 8th annual Gallup Poll on Education. The public view and the Supreme Court decision seem to play right into the hands of the backward looking professional who wants more control over public education. Now that the Supreme Court would permit spanking in school, school professionals can return to the 19th century classroom where the switch was the dominant factor in the classroom. Despite the increasing empowerment of the professional, the problems of education are not going to go away.

Efforts to achieve a privileged status are backfiring on educational personnel. Competencies in the basic skills are declining. Educational costs are going up. Professionals appear to have an oligarchic rule over public education. Among the professional disciplines educators earn the least, have the least amount of prestige, and professional public educators have almost no influence on important social policy development relevant to education. What's more, professional educators have no constituency other than themselves. In fact, the fervent supporters of professional educators in the early 1960's have become estranged opponents to the oligarchic rule of professional educators. Parents and students are pitted

against educators. Educational administrators appear to be pitted against teachers and their labor organizations. School boards are opposed to increased citizen participation because they see themselves as the duly elected representatives of the public. Political officials hob-nob with labor organizations in order to ensure needed campaign contributions. For sure, the disparate factions of the educational arena are not going to solve educational problems with the present arrangement of key players. If anything the problems promise to get worse.

Who's to blame? Who bears the burden of responsibility? As a child my mother always asked me whether blaming my brother for wrongdoing solved the problem. I would always have to answer "no," because whatever got broken during the course of the wrongdoing would still be broken after I blamed by brother. Then my very clever mother would say, "You are equally responsible for this broken window because you should have stopped your brother from doing it."

The same is true in education. There is no lay control of education. There is very little lay participation in education. When failures in education float to the top, as they always do, putting the blame here or there is fine, but the professional educators and social scientists who are most astute at placing blame bear lots of the responsibility.

## WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

In the 1700's many communities of fifty or more families were providing a free public education to the young living in

the community. There were notable exceptions of course, like Black children, Native Americans, and women.

Since our beginnings in public education we have come through school consolidation, progressive education, cults of efficiency, increased state control, professionalization, universal education opportunities, equalization efforts, and recently, collective bargaining. We have also crept into a form of neo-democracy that separates the average citizen from those arenas that most affect life in a community. Our neo-democracy decries public participation in professional education. Disdain for the uninformed is what our neo-democracy has gotten us.

Since education was yanked away from lay control and lodged in the hands of superintendents and their surrogate building monitors -- principals -- education has become increasingly mysterious and incoherent. The mystery and incoherence of public education has bred ignorance, misunderstanding, and a progressive loss of confidence. In public education we have come from a tradition of confidence to a tradition of no confidence. It may be coincidental but the growth of no confidence seems to parallel the centrality of the professional to public education.

In Pennsylvania, public education has evolved from a constitutional provision for a "thorough and efficient" education to a tradition of custodial care in your urban schools and the emergence of fundamentalist schools in your rural communities. Given what actually gets organized in some schools we wonder whether or not professional

educators too have lost confidence in public education and have settled for being educated, employed wards of the state.

PENNSYLVANIA'S SCHOOL BOARDS

Early state law established that townships were responsible for providing education to youth. The cooperation between state governments and local communities can best be described as tense. State governments developed regulations and delegated implementation to local communities. As early as 1834 the state of Pennsylvania demonstrated an interest in having public education governed by a locally elected school board. This movement created more tension. Perhaps the tension between local communities and central governance is natural, but it is often costly to local communities.

The tension between local control and central governance is not limited to Pennsylvania. All over the country tension between state departments of education and local boards of education is evident. Generally, local boards that isolate other citizens in the local communities are not as effective in the tug-of-war with state officials as they might be.

One explanation for this might be the realization that education has become significantly political. In Pennsylvania the School Boards Association has recommended careful monitoring of proposed state legislation in order that the impact of such legislation on local communities be assessed before legislation is passed. Clearly, this is an uphill battle.

Proposals for state legislation ought to be generated by local communities. Superintendents, particularly the

Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators ought to be generating legislative proposals by the bushel and organizing the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and massive parent and citizen support for these legislative proposals. Perhaps the tension between state and local educational officials is natural, but our research leads us to conclude that local education officials are generally passive and reactive in the tug-of-war.

Local school boards around the country are in an important position. They hire the personnel. This is perhaps their most cherished responsibility but not the most important. Perhaps the most important responsibility is the one least attended to by school board members. From our point of view that responsibility is restoring public confidence in public education by involving the public in critical decision making activities at the local level. We have found that where school boards scorn public involvement, educational professionals also scorn public involvement. The reverse also appears to be characteristic. That is, where professional staff encourage the role of the parent and citizen in the educational process, local boards of education adopt the same view.

As an elitist clique, local school boards and their hired professional staff can never expect to turn the tide of increased central control of education. Only well informed public outcries, massive public support for legislative proposals, and a restored confidence in local educational officials is likely to curb the influence of state departments

on local educational matters. However, such an approach depends on systemic citizen and parent participation in the educational affairs of local school districts.

Nationally, the view of Pennsylvania's school boards is that they are the most conservative, inward looking collection of local school boards in the country. If true, there is the possibility of, and the need for, the professional staff, specifically superintendents, to provide some useful and courageous leadership to their employers regarding the reinstatement of the public in public education.

## SUPERINTENDENTS AND THE NEW THIRD FORCE

At I.R.E. we have made the mistake of identifying the public as a third force in local educational decision making. Our mistake played havoc with our ideas of citizen and parent participation. The mistake is somewhat historical. The true latecomer to the educational arena is organized labor. The teacher organizations are the true third force in local educational decision making. The scenario goes something like this: first, there was lay control of education delegated to local communities by state legislatures. Secondly, local communities employed professional staff to assist the community in fulfilling its educational responsibility. Thirdly, the employed professional staff, as recently as the early 1960's organized themselves to protect their self interests. In this scenario the latecomer to the arena of educational control is organized labor. To some extent parents and citizens may be called survivors -- those responsible for early developments

who were displaced by latecomers. Wedged in between, as a kind of buffer, are superintendents.

Latecomers are those who appear after a process or a model has been developed. The latecomer does whatever is necessary to get in on the benefits of the process or the model. Almost always the latecomer seizes unexpected influence after the passage of time, usually to the chagrin of those responsible for early developments.

As latecomers, teacher organizations have accumulated a massive amount of political and economic influence in a very short time period. With the passage of collective bargaining laws, teacher organizations have terrorized local communities with the threat of strike. In Pennsylvania there have been more strikes than threats of strike. This is due in part to the passage in 1970 of Act 195. It is also due to the demise of the public presence in educational matters, the neither fish nor fowl character of professional administrators, and the labor organization elected official loop. The result is that teacher organizations, the latecomers, have significant control of public education. Other local forces have either acquiesced or have been disenfranchised.

The demise of the public presence in educational matters is a severe loss. It lays bare and vulnerable the decision making process. Teachers will not allow school administrators to be the sole advocate for what's best in public education. Teachers do not seem very responsive to the elite cliques that are formed around elected school

boards. This may be a result of an absent constituency or public. School boards and their hired administrators generally do not have a clear constituency for whom they are making decisions. Where there is no parallel force, the latecomers have no need to be responsive. The only parallel force to a teacher organization in a local community is a well-informed citizenry.

The neither fish nor fowl character of professional administrators lends itself to the empowerment of the latecomers. On one hand school administrators are employees of local school boards. On the other hand many school administrators are members of teacher organizations, and are sympathetic past members. This is the problem of two masters.

The problem is compounded by the fact that administrators must work with teachers who are members of the teacher organizations at the same time that teacher organizations are advocating adversarial relations with school boards and administrators.

Are administrators buffers? To whom do they owe their allegiance?

We know from our study of the "Pragmatics of Human Communication" that the only way out of this double bind is to step back, take a critical look at the situation, and stand up to be counted by taking a position. To be neither fish nor fowl in the equation exacerbates the problem.

The labor organization/elected official loop is perhaps the most disruptive of the public interest in education. This loop is best described as, "you scratch my back, and

I'll scratch yours." The labor organization supports political candidates, who as elected officials then support the labor organization. Over and over again the dislocated public, because of its separation, does not participate. This non-participation leaves the field open for vested interest to dominate. So what we end up with, in the form of elected officials -- school board members included -- are people who have been supported by the latecomers and who are beholden to those who have supported them.

The most naked example of the loop came to our attention through a letter mailed to all of the members of a teacher organization in a local school district. The letter said, "Dear Colleague ... the district is now engaged in WAR with the Parents Association presidents ... the war is based on the parents supporting the six incumbents on the board ... our organization is not endorsing any of the incumbents for these reasons: (1) loss of support services in district (guidance counselors, librarians, etc.), (2) two years ago we endorsed seven of the nine who got in ... since then they have only dealt with the parents, and (3) they mailed out a legislative position paper which included the following recommendations; (a) no board of education employee should serve on the local school board, (b) do away with board of education licensing procedures for "essential curriculum areas" so that principals can select the best candidates based on experience and courses -- no tests! and (c) when teachers go off probation, tenure should not be automatic -- they should submit their records... this is the WAR ... we

must defeat these incumbents ... we must elect at least five of our endorsed candidates."

This sort of response to lay participation in public education does not help restore public confidence in public education. Furthermore, if the letter above is reflective of teacher organizations around the country, then the restoration of public confidence in education rests with aggressive administrative leadership and fully franchised public participation in educational matters. From our point of view the nondescript administrator and the absent public are fundamental to the increasing power of educational labor organizations.

I.R.E. is not opposed to educational labor organizations. In fact we firmly believe that there are legitimate labor interests that are best protected by those affected. We also believe that participation in school governance is a right of every citizen affected and that any efforts to discourage, ignore, downplay, or sabbotage attempts by citizens to participate in educational decision making is anti-democratic.

## STRATEGIES FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY FOR RESTORING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE

The problem of low public confidence in education is not limited to Pennsylvania. All over the country, in small rural communities and large urban communities, in rich and poor districts, school officials are struggling to restore public confidence. In attempting to achieve this end, many school officials have failed to recognize what we consider

to be highly probable eventualities in American public education in the coming decade.

Some of these eventualities are: collective bargaining is here to stay and promises to extend to those states that do not now have legislated collective bargaining laws. Enrollments will probably continue to decline, resulting in underutilized facilities, an overabundance of educational personnel, and escalating costs. As the participation of citizens diminishes, the influence of private interest groups will probably increase. With the decline of citizen participation there will probably be a significant growth in state influence and control. And finally, increase in state influence and teacher union influence may reduce the function of school administrators to that of school clerk!

At this time there is only one community force able to curtail this fairly bleak outlook for the future. The force to which we refer is the coalition of administrators, citizens and parents, students and teachers. In a collaborative effort the future of public education might brighten considerably. There is also evidence that the quality of education may improve.

If a coalition effort were possible in your local community, what exactly would it do? Well, from around the country we can draw some important lessons. Perhaps the most important lesson that we have learned is that there are no two communities exactly alike. This realization has rendered us at I.R.E. very cautious about proposing strategies for restoring public confidence, simply because they

have succeeded in other communities. It is our belief that restoring public confidence begins with public efforts to identify the problems which require coalition attention. Once identified, the strategies appropriate to the local community need to be identified by the community coalition.

What we bring to you are some strategies that other communities have used with varying degrees of success. They are mentioned here, not because they are sure-fire panaceas but because they do represent contexts in which thought-about strategies for restoring public confidence might take place.

## STRENGTHENED LOCAL ADVISORY COUNCILS

Advisory councils are not a new formulation but what they have been are mouthpieces for school administrations. In this capacity their credibility with the public has worn thin. A meaningful local school advisory council could be the backbone to restoring public confidence in education.

The membership of such a council should be elected. Meetings should be open to anyone in the community who wishes to speak. Most councils around the country are predominately composed of parents, but strong efforts should be made to involve teachers. Most councils are perceived as unrepresentative of the community, but this may be a direct result of the failure to recruit a wide cross-section of council candidates.

Once in place, our research shows that effective councils require a full range of support services. The support require-

ments range from access to information about the local school, to state of federal legislation which affects the local school. In addition to information, councils require clarity about their roles and responsibilities.

Councils are largely ignored or isolated from the critical decision making that takes place in a local school. Some of these decisions include budgetary matters, personnel decisions, and developments regarding the educational program.

Correspondent to these requirements for effective councils is the need to provide councils with training about planning, organizing, and working with a group. Simply stated, the surest road, if there is such a road, to restoring public confidence, is the road that develops a community's capability to identify and resolve the perplexing problems facing its schools in a collaborative fashion. The strengthened local school advisory council is one such road.

## CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Around the country, among those states that have legislated collective bargaining provisions, there is a growing interest among citizens and parents to voice their views at the bargaining table. In some communities there is a conservative backlash that seeks to dismantle collective bargaining completely. Whatever the local disposition, it is clear in our contacts with various communities around the country, that citizen participation is central to the reform of the collective bargaining

process.

For example, communities like Plymouth, Michigan have experimented with citizens participating at the bargaining table. In New York City there is interest in strengthening the management side of the table, while simultaneously decentralizing the issues to be centrally negotiated. In Toronto, Canada and Newark, New Jersey, there are similar experiments with multilevel bargaining. California's new collective bargaining law has a "presentation of initial proposals at public meeting" provision. The provision allows local citizens to respond to initial proposals of employees and employers before negotiations begin. Florida's sunshine law seeks to minimize the secrecy and mystery of the bargaining process by having the process take place in the fishbowl under public scrutiny. Wisconsin's State Office of Public Instruction has proposed legislation that seeks to balance the teacher organizations' pursuit of the legislative right to strike. The proposal would have the community act as final mediator in the event of impasses in the educational bargaining process. Recently, the Massachusetts legislature narrowly defeated a proposal to outlaw public sector bargaining completely.

The point here is that there is some activity going on around the country that seeks to reform the collective bargaining process in education. Pennsylvania's Act 195 is among the country's most liberal legislation in favor of public sector employees. The Governor's Study Commission on Act 195 chaired by Chief Justice Benjamin R. Jones is a fair indication

that there is some interest in rethinking public sector collective bargaining in the state. From our vantage point there is no meaningful way to effect reform without systematic and systemic citizen participation. This is particularly true in collective bargaining where the outcomes of agreements are likely to mean increased taxation for residents in local communities. It is important to note the variety of activities going on around the country while paying special attention to the variations in strategy. Each community has a unique strategy, and this is as it should be. Dr. John Dunlop, former U. S. Secretary of Labor, has recently reminded us that there is no one model of collective bargaining in the private sector. Why should there be only one model in the public sector?

IMPROVED COMMUNICATION

Perhaps the single best strategy is a thoroughly modern approach to information dissemination. Ignorance about school affairs is the source of pervasive misunderstanding about what goes on inside a local school. An informed public is an important ally when there is a need or interest in improving education. Using the modern tools of communication can be the means by which the lost links between the schools and the public are restored.

The management of information by school administrators establishes a climate for school/community relations. The clearest example of information dissemination having a negative impact on school/community relations happens over

the issue of school budgets. It is common for a community to be interested in the cost of a new program or a recently signed collective bargaining agreement. It is common to have officials declare loud and clear that there will be no new increases in taxes. Increasingly schools are having to close because the game of coming back later for more tax money to complete the academic year is not being tolerated by the public.

This type of information diminisnes public confidence in public education. There are useful tools that allow school officials to deliver bad news in constructive ways. Propoganda does not stand the test of time and it will always haunt the most sincere school administrator. Improving the communication capability of a local school district will enhance the restoration of public confidence in public education.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

We've discussed strategies, tools, and new structures for involving the public in public education. There has been an attempt to demonstrate the folly of attempting to restore public confidence without close collaboration with the local community. We have argued the right of the community to participate in educational decision making. Also, we have forecast the likely results of continued disenfranchisement of the citizen with regard to public education.

But, you ask, how can you allow the public to make

decisions about education when they don't have the background, the knowledge, the expertise? You might also ask who is the public?

These are not easy questions to answer. They are also not new questions. From our point of view the task of the leader, or one responsibility of professional educators, is to answer these questions for themselves in a manner most helpful to restoring public confidence in one's own local school district. There are no blueprints for answering these questions.

As a provocation, I wish to leave you with this letter from Lord Acton to Mary Gladstone written on 24 April, 1881.

> *"...they will say, like practical men, that the ignorant classes cannot understand affairs of state, and are sure to go wrong ... the fact is that education, intelligence, wealth, are a security against certain faults of conduct, not against errors in policy. There is no error so monstrous that it fails to find defenders among the ablest men. Imagine a congress of eminent celebrities, such as More, Bacon, Grotius, Pascal, Cromwell, Bossuet, Montesquieu, Jefferson, Napoleon, Pitt, etc. The results would be an encyclopedia of error... if you were to read Walter Scott's pamphlets, Sothey's Colloquies, Ellenborough's Diary, Wellington's Despatches -- distrust of the select few, of the chosen leaders of the community, would displace the dread of the masses. The danger is not that a particular class is unfit to govern. Every class is unfit to govern. The law of liberty tends to abolish the origin of race over race, of faith over faith, of class over class. It is not the realization of a political ideal; it is the discharge of a moral obligation..."*